

Philately Metamorphosis

by Mike Blackledge

During the latter days of December 2016, I received an envelope in the mail that had an immediate reaction within my remaining memory neurons. *"No cookie nibbled by a French novelist could send one into the past more suddenly..."*ⁱ

I'm sure there was a Christmas card somewhere inside that envelope, but that was not the source of my reaction – I was struck by the bright red envelope itself, apparently sent through the regular mail service but with an array of seven or eight commemorative stamps. Old stamps. Real stamps. No "Forever" stamps here, these stamps were marked with actual U.S. postage of 6¢, 8¢, 10¢, yes even **'FOUR CENTS.'** The lick 'em and stick 'em variety.



The four center was the oldest and the one that most attracted me: the gray 4¢ Army stamp featured portraits of General Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, with Stratford Hall in the center. I had owned this stamp. I almost certainly still did – somewhere it was hinged and mounted in an album in a box on the top shelf of my guest room closet. From December 1936 to May 1937, the United States Post Office issued a series of ten commemorative postage stamps depicting war heroes from the Army and Navy. This stamp represents one of the few instances in which military leaders who bore arms against the United States have been featured on a U.S. postage stamp.

Heck, I might even have a First Day Cover featuring this stamp. A first day of issue cover or first day cover is a postage stamp on an envelope postmarked on the first day the stamp is authorized for use within the country. There is a shoebox of First Day Covers on that shelf as well.

Much of the better parts of my youth revolved around building that collection, beginning with the introduction and encouragement of Aunt Kathie that eased me into this hobby. Technically, Kathryn Forrant Crotty would have been my 'Great-Aunt Kathie' as she was the only surviving sibling of my mother's mother. And as you read this, your non-Massachusetts brain almost certainly subvocalized "Aunt" as **"ant"** – but Mother was born in Salem, Mass (with the witches, my father would remind us) and it was always pronounced **"ont"** in my childhood – along with "baath" and "paath" – the long "ah" never the harsh **"A"**.

As to which came first, my interest in stamps or Aunt Kathie's encouragement, that is hard to say. But for a 10 or 11-year old boy in the 1950s in Houston, for an envelope to show up in the mail addressed specifically to him, that was huge. It was always obvious that the envelope came from Aunt Kathie, as her spindly script was captured in a distinctive green ink – we are talking real ink here, nothing typed or printed – of a brightness I have never seen before or since. My mother's family was Irish-Catholic, so I thought of it as Irish Green. Aunt Kathie was the most important person in my mother's life before she met my father.ⁱⁱ

Soon I began collecting my own stamps – I would tear off the corner of the envelope, run some warm water into a shallow cereal bowl, carefully submerge the corner, and after a time, the stamp would float right off. Then I would discard the soggy envelope and lay the stamps, face down, on some clean paper until they dried. Then into my album or my shoebox.

Postage in the 1950s stayed constant at 3¢ for years, and I subsequently ended up saving many, certainly hundreds, of the standard 3¢ postage stamp most everyone used. The books on collecting said that



“duplicates are important because you can trade those to other collectors for stamps you need.” I must have been cheap (‘frugal’) from a young age – one of my father’s oft-repeated aphorisms was “*Save your money!*” So I saved those stamps. But how many of these 3¢ duplicates should I keep? More and more. Perhaps more would be worth something.

Soon I wanted to expand my collection, and I knew that would cost money. My parents ‘awarded’ me \$5 a month allowance for taking out the trash and doing my homework. Not enough to add much to my collection. I didn’t have many ways to earn money. One that was constant was touch-typing. My mother insisted on certain abilities for her children, and among these were reading, swimming, and touch-typing. We didn’t get paid to read or to swim, but touch-typing was a gold mine. Just for typing and using all of one’s fingers without looking at the keys. Mother had purchased a set of gray caps to cover the major keys of the keyboard, and had a list of lessons to go through to memorize and practice the art of touch-typing. I would sit there and type out: “**fjdk fjdk fjdk fjdk**” For every error-free line I created on the typewriter paper, I earned 1¢. Cash.

The other primary method of earning money was selling soft drinks at Rice Stadium. On home game days, about an hour before kick-off time I would walk the mile to the stadium, and find the vendor in charge of selling soft drinks. For \$1, you purchased a bucket of 12 bottles of Coke or Seven-up, and the vendor would dump in some ice before I departed and add a stack of paper cups. Then I would trudge off with the bucket, climb up the cement stairs of the stadium, calling out, “Soda-water! Get yer Ice Cold Soda-water!” As the Houston heat and humidity wore on, eventually some fan would say, “Soda-water! Over here!” It was 10¢ a drink, and with the bottle-opener tied to the bucket handle, you would pop off the bottle cap, get a little ice from the bucket, pour the coke into the cup, let it settle, pour the rest, and pass it down the row. The fan would pass the money, usually a dollar bill, and you would make change and pass it back. When you sold all your drinks, you had cleared 20 cents profit, and you’d head back for a refill of your bucket and start over. Soon I was able to carry two buckets, one in each hand, and slash my turnaround time. Other guys would tell me to get up to the top of the stadium where all the drunks congregated; the drunks were big tippers, as they wanted the 7-up as a mixer for their alcohol.

That was good money, maybe \$10 a game, but there were only five or so home games each year. As I would walk the mile or two to the stadium, I would always be envious of the homes that were close to the stadium, with signs in their driveway, “Park here for \$5!” What an easy way to earn \$5!

Once I had some money saved up, I would choose a Saturday and head off to the stamp dealers downtown. My mother never learned to drive, but another attribute that she taught her children was how to use public transportation, wherever we lived. Before Houston, my sisters and I would take the electric trolley to the Indianapolis Athletic Club downtown, where we kids swam our mile or half-mile (depending on our age) to complete our workout. In Houston, I would walk to the bus stop on Greenbriar and then take the bus downtown and get off on Capitol Street and the Continental Bank Building.ⁱⁱⁱ

I would take the elevator up to the third floor and enter the tiny 321 office of the Mitula Stamp and Coin Co. It was probably 10’ x 12’, strictly a one-person operation. Old Man Mitula would be sitting, bent over behind a large desk with a glass sheet on the top, through which you could view a plethora of stamps, just a beautiful display.

He would always ask, “What do you collect? U.S.? Foreign?” This question always confused me, and I would usually stammer, “Ah... well, mainly U.S., some foreign.” And he’d say, “OK, sit down.” And he would start bringing out different stamps and often a few specialty items. Pull them out with stamp tongs and lay them on the glass in front of me. Whenever he would select for me a stamp from underneath his glass display surface, I would always feel guilty. I couldn’t believe he was willing to sell me a stamp from his own collection. But I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to discourage him, and got my money out before he changed his mind.

Then, in 1953, he wanted to sell me a little album. I had a big stamp album by then, but he explained this was a specialty album. It was about 5" x 8", covered in blue cloth, created specifically for Queen Elizabeth's coronation in June. He said this would be an important addition, so I started buying Queen Elizabeth coronation stamps. I kept adding them to the album, but I didn't like them as much as Old Man Mitula wanted to sell them to me. There was little difference between the designs. Each was issued for a different member of the Commonwealth – Aden, Abyssinia, Australia, etc. – but they were all essentially the same stamp, with only a change of denomination, colony name, and sometimes (not often) color. It went on and on, and I never did fill that little album.

By the time I was in high school, I considered myself a sophisticated stamp collector – I had attended numerous stamp shows, and had fielded (wrongly) the most difficult question posed to me in Life, by a dealer at one of those shows: "Do you soak the stamp off the paper, or the paper off the stamp?" "uh ... the stamp off the paper?" I stammered. "WRONG!" boomed the dealer – "You need to get ALL the paper off the stamp!"

I knew Aunt Kathie was getting elderly, and since it was all about me, I finally worked up my courage to write a letter, asking if she would consider bequeathing her collection to me some day. I didn't get a reply, and tried again. Finally, in the mail arrived a small packet with an even smaller stamp album – it was one of those H.E. Harris paper albums that beginners get for free. Inside was a smattering of stamps, some of which were even scotch-taped to the page. I was embarrassed. How could this be Aunt Kathie's collection? Could she have sent all those First Day Covers to me, and never built a collection herself? Aunt Kathie wasn't a 'real' collector?

I never met Aunt Kathie, never spoke to her on the phone. She lived well into my teen years, whereas her sister, my mother's mother, had died the year before I was born.

Later in Life when I got into genealogy and my mother was no longer alive, I found her mother's birth records, and birth records for Aunt Kathie. Surprisingly, each of them had been born a twin! And during one disastrous winter (1895-1896) on the Glancy farm, five of the seven children had died from what my mother had called "the black diphtheria." The next Spring, my great-great-grandfather Patrick Glancy was killed in a farm accident, and my great-great-grandmother was forced to put the farm up for auction and move her two surviving daughters into a small duplex in the town of Ware. My mother took my father there only once, and my father came back to spit dismissively, "It was nothing but a little Irish shanty."

Looking back today, there were many Life Lessons that I learned from those days and from stamp collecting. Often while working genealogy I have thought how like stamp collecting it is, only with collecting people. Rather than placing a stamp into an album where it belongs, you place the name/birth/death event into your database. Filling in the blanks of Life still provides pleasure.

I had learned about the value of money and converting it to a collection "of great value." One interesting comparison that comes to me now is that Old Man Mitula's stamp office was much like Adm. Rickover's small crowded office when I went for my interview in the Navy Annex just a decade later. Albin Joseph "Joe" Mitula was born in 1896 (the same year my father was born and my mother's mother lost her siblings) and was buried in Houston in 1972. Hyman Rickover was younger than both of them (b. 1900) and outlived them both (1986). I also found other Mitula Co. customers and learned Joe Mitula was somewhat famous for accumulating a million 1950-D nickels during those 1950s.

Now if you'll excuse me, I want to take one more look at that envelope.



ⁱ from *The Lanyard* by Billy Collins.

ⁱⁱ July 25, 1931, Tokyo - Dear Kathie: First I will tell you about the trip coming over. I met the nicest Lieutenant in the Navy. He has just come from teaching two years at Annapolis Naval Academy and will have three years duty in China. Well, we were together all during the trip and he sure is a peach. Very good looking and as nice as he is good looking... and I was asked to spend my vacation in Shanghai by Allan. I have never known anyone as nice as he is and I'm not going to risk any chance of losing developing this friendship just because my insurance premiums are so high I won't have enough saved by the time summer comes.

P.S. Don't tell Mother about the Lieutenant as she will put it in the news.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Continental Bank Building at 220 Main Street (Main and Congress) in Houston was built in 1911 as the Union National Bank Building, and Mitula's first office was in the upper floors of that address. See FindAGrave.com memorial 143955908. Today the building is called Hotel Icon under Houston's "Historic District", but it was also known as the Pan American Bank Building and the Natural Gas Building.